DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 425 CS 214 485

AUTHOR O'Neil, John
TITLE Rewriting the Book on Literature--Changes Sought in How Literature Is Taught, What Students Read.
INSTITUTION Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE Jun 94
NOTE 9p.; Photographs will not copy clearly.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT ASCD Curriculum Update; Jun 1994

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Enrichment; *Educational Innovation; *Elementary Secondary Education; Integrated Curriculum; Reader Response; *Reading Material Selection; Student Needs; Theory Practice Relationship; Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS Trade Books

ABSTRACT

This article reports that curriculum experts see some slow but significant shifts in thinking regarding the role of literature in the K-12 curriculum. The article first discusses changes in elementary classrooms, such as the use of "real" literature in the form of trade books. Also considered is the call for new basal readers or content changes in older readers to reflect new views on the teaching of reading, such as the whole language approach. California has been successful in using literature throughout the curriculum. A continuing trend at all levels of education--elementary, middle, and secondary--is to broaden the scope of the literature curriculum to reflect diverse points of view (especially multicultural) and more contemporary offerings. One of the reasons for making a broader range of literature available to students is to increase the chance that they will "engage" or "connect" with the literature. This is an outgrowth of the widespread interest among teachers in reader response theory. Teachers have taken an eclectic path regarding the teaching of literature: organizing the curriculum around traditional genres, chronologies, or themes; using reader response techniques to foster student involvement; and relying on traditional techniques for studying individual texts. The article quotes Arthur Applebee, who calls for a well articulated, overall theory of the teaching and learning of literature. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 374 425

ASCD

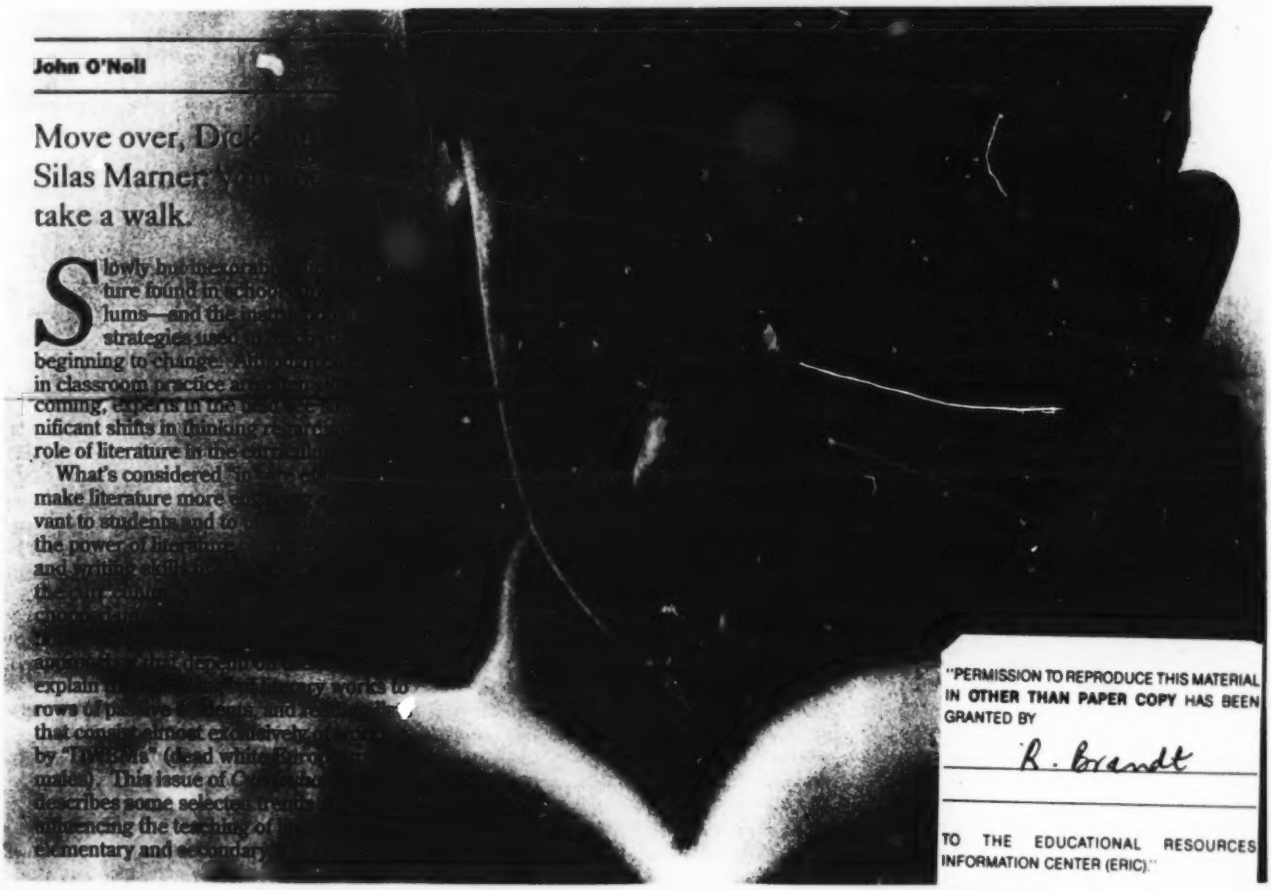
CURRICULUM Update

June 1994

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1250 N. Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1453
(703) 549-9110

Rewriting the Book on Literature

Changes Sought in How Literature is Taught, What Students Read



John O'Neil

Move over, Dick
Silas Marner, you
take a walk.

Slowly but
ture found in
lums—and the
strategies
beginning to change.
in classroom practice
coming, experts in the
nificant shifts in thinking
role of literature in the

What's considered
make literature more
vant to students and to
the power of literature
and writing
the
ch
to
ap
explain
rows of
that
by "DWEMs" (dead white European
males). This issue of
describes some selected
influencing the teaching of
elementary and secondary

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
R. Brandt
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

AS214485

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Real Literature

Perhaps the predominant change in what literature is taught in elementary schools is a new interest in using more "real" literature in the curriculum. Dick and Jane, it seems, are on the way out, and classrooms are filling up with dog-eared versions of children's classics and fiction and nonfiction on every conceivable topic. The catchphrase for the new interest in using literature in elementary classrooms is "literature-based" programs. "The literature-based trend is very strong," says Carl Smith, professor of education at Indiana University and director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication.

In general, literature-based programs differ from traditional approaches by surrounding students with rich, authentic, whole pieces of literature from the earliest grades; by teaching reading skills in the context of real literature; and by using literature throughout the curriculum.

What does a visitor see in a classroom using a literature-based approach? For one thing, the classroom itself is rich with print, says Rudine Sims Bishop, professor of education at the Ohio State University. In most of these classrooms, trade books are in abundant supply, either in the school library or in classroom libraries. The textbooks tend to be used as a resource; they do not serve as the sole source for the entire language arts curriculum. "It's a literate environment," says Bishop. Students "are surrounded by all kinds of books."

The books, moreover, are diverse—in topics, culture of the characters and the authors, and difficulty. Students and teachers are talking to each other about their reading. Pupils are "using books for information" to help them in subjects other than reading or language arts. "I see literature used throughout the curriculum," says Bishop.

Experts in the field say that literature-based programs draw support from the increasingly popular "whole language" approach to developing student literacy. "The whole language philosophy includes a literature base for language arts instruction," says Smith. "Probably the beginning point of whole language" is "getting kids out of the basal [readers] and into real books."

Some experts see whole language and literature-based approaches as a correction in course for an elementary-level curriculum that has overemphasized the teaching of discrete reading skills at the expense of treating students to high-quality literature. What's now needed, many say, are approaches that bring about balance in the use of literature to teach reading skills.

In traditional language arts programs in the early primary grades, experts say, literature has often taken a backseat to the teaching of phonics and other decoding skills. "It's partly how one views how people learn to read," explains Bishop. Traditional methods have emphasized the teaching of various subskills (e.g., sound-letter relationships, vocabulary words) plus comprehension skills (e.g., learning to identify the main idea or the sequence of events), she says. Although these skills are important, the teaching of these skills too frequently became ends in themselves. Basals included stories designed to teach children phonics, adds Charles Suhor, deputy executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The problem was, the books ended up reading "as if they were written to illustrate phonics," rather than to tell an interesting story. As a result of the emphasis on skills, worksheets and drill sheets built around discrete subskills abounded. Teachers sometimes drilled students endlessly on the skills, leaving little time for students to put their skills into practice by looking at or reading a good book (or having one read to them). Traditional reading theory held that students learned to read through repeated exposure to new words, notes Jim Hoffman, professor of language and literacy studies at the University of Texas. So basal readers began to include stories constructed to provide this repeated exposure—repeating the same word up to 40 times in a selection, says Hoffman. The result? The stories that children read too often followed the "Dick and Jane" pattern of sanitized and tightly controlled vocabulary that proved bland and monotonous to read.

In whole-language and literature-based programs, the teaching of skills is supposed to be placed squarely in the context of reading good literature. The theory is that "the teacher will [incorporate the skills] organically, as the occasion arises in the conduct of reading" together, says Smith. For example, in a classroom following the literature-based philosophy, the teacher might read a story aloud to the whole class, says Smith. Students might pair up and read to each other. Afterward, the teacher might teach vocabulary words found in the story. "The literature becomes the focal point from which other things arise."

A major feature of the changes sought in the use of literature in the early elementary grades is that programs must be balanced and flexible, drawing on the best of skills-based and literature-based strategies, experts say. A working paper drafted by the California Department of Education notes: "Over the years, in the quest to teach early reading successfully, educators have used a variety of approaches, ranging from methods that emphasize literature and the processes of reading and writing (to the exclusion of phonics and other skill-based strategies) to the traditional code-oriented approaches that emphasize skills at the expense of liter-

Library of Congress

Courtesy Fairfax County Public Schools, Randy Wyant

Changing views on how children learn to read have fueled the trend toward literature-based programs.

ature and reading and writing. Neither of these extremist approaches has been effective for all students." The preferred approach in California and elsewhere is a literature-based program that includes phonics and other decoding strategies.

New Books Sought

A major factor influencing the use of literature in the elementary grades is the role that basal readers, trade books, and other reading materials play in the curriculum. Most experts contacted for this *Curriculum Update* favored changes in the content of basal readers (as well as less dependence on the textbook in general) and greater use of a wide range of trade books.

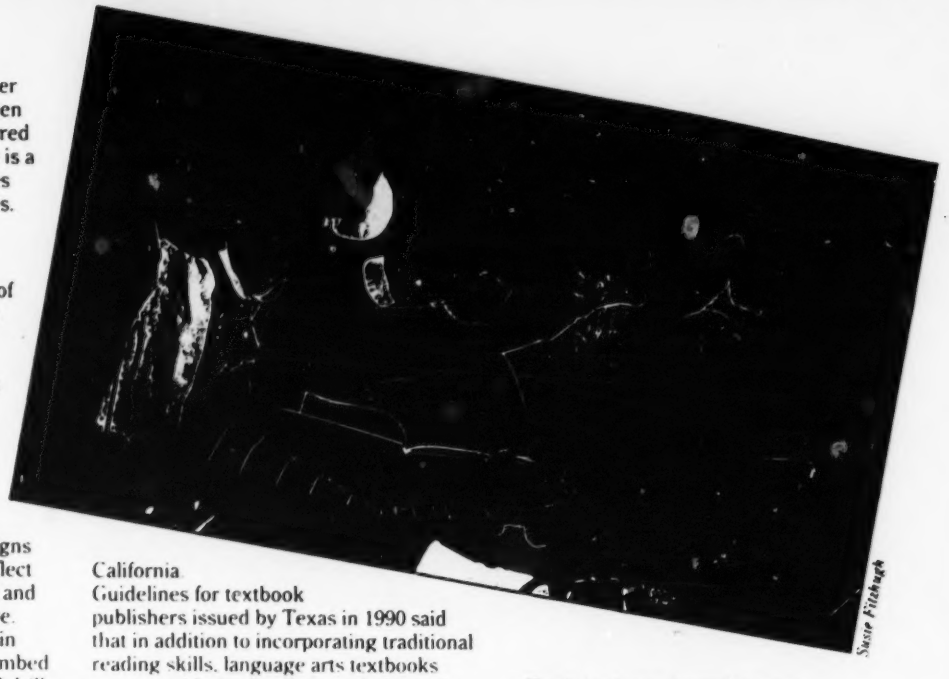
Some experts point to promising signs that basal readers are changing to reflect new views on the teaching of reading and the renewed interest in good literature. More frequently, the textbooks contain whole stories, rather than edited, "dumbed down" versions; and decontextualized drills on skills are less commonly a feature. Some of the newer elementary readers "look more and more like literature anthologies than they do 'Dick and Jane,'" says Smith. In some cases, "they look like trade books mashed together."

Both Texas and California, which together represent a significant share of the market for basal readers, have issued new guidelines for publishers stressing integrated, literature-based programs.

California took the plunge first, issuing a new curriculum framework (which textbook publishers are supposed to address) for language arts in 1988. The framework called for literature-based, integrated programs that taught explicit skills in the context of literature. Publishers did not fully follow the guidelines, however, says Glen Thomas, director of curriculum frameworks and instructional resources for the California Department of Education. The programs submitted "were not integrated, they were not balanced," he says. For example, "none of them taught spelling in the context of reading and writing."

Since then, however, Thomas feels that the changes advocated by the framework have gained broader appeal in the field. The calls to boost the use of real literature and to integrate literature across the curriculum "are more pronounced now," he thinks. "We're still probably out in front of the market, but less so than in years past." The state plans to adopt new textbooks and instructional resources for grades K–2 this year, he adds, and he believes the new materials will better reflect the new emphases.

Texas may already be a step ahead of California. Guidelines for textbook publishers issued by Texas in 1990 said that in addition to incorporating traditional reading skills, language arts textbooks must provide "a pluralistic anthology of quality children's literature", contain unabridged literature; and integrate reading with writing, speaking, and listening activities.



Susie Fitzhugh

Trade books are becoming more popular, especially when they can be shared with peers.

A study by researchers at the University of Texas on 1st grade basal readers adopted under the new guidelines (and placed in classrooms this school year) suggests the new books *do* differ from older books in some important ways. Adaptations of the literature in the new basals are minimal, and the vocabulary control and repetition that characterized the old basals have been significantly reduced, the study says. In addition, the teaching of skills in the new books has not been diminished, but the presentation of those skills has changed. The skills have been placed in the context of the literature, rather than standing in isolation, and are usually taught *after* students read the selection.

Because the basal readers sold in Texas will be marketed nationally, the changes are likely to have a significant impact on the use of literature in the early grades, says Hoffman, one of the study authors (and also, it should be noted, an author of one of the basal readers). In the past, publishers have usually been reluctant to make major changes until they sensed sufficient demand in the field for a new approach. The fact that the publishers *did* respond to the new guidelines suggests that they believe many educators are ready for a more balanced approach to reading and literature. Still, Hoffman admits that neither anti-basal whole language advocates nor strong proponents of the traditional skills-based approach are likely to fully embrace the compromise. "The extremes in both directions will not be satisfied," he says. Moreover, the implementation of the new basals will have to be carefully watched to see how they influence classroom practice. "It's a big leap in the way we approach reading instruction," says Hoffman. "A lot of people are sitting back with their fingers crossed" on this new type of program.

Integrated Curriculum

One of the successful aspects of California's approach has been the effort to use literature throughout the curriculum, says Thomas. Many teachers are interested in ways to use literature in different subject areas, and the Department of Education has issued a popular series of books of recommended readings in different subjects.

For California teacher Pam Cook, literature provides the vehicle for integrating the curriculum. Cook, who teaches 5th and 6th grades at Redwood Heights Elementary School in Oakland, uses literature to help teach concepts in subjects such as science and social studies. She "pulls" literature selections from the lists of recommended readings included in California's frameworks for language arts, history, and social science, she says.

As part of a science unit on wolves, for example, Cook has her students read Jack London's *White Fang* and a book about dogsledding. In social studies, students read historical fiction to gain a more in-depth understanding of early colonial

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

history and ancient civilizations. One book students "really like" is *The Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth Speare, which deals with the relationship between Native Americans and white settlers, Cook notes.

Educators in other states share similar aims. "I see literature as being the driver of cross-disciplinary themes," says Carol Santa, coordinator of language arts and social studies for School District No. 5 in Kalispell, Mont. The district has tried to move to an integrated curriculum model heavily grounded in literature, especially trade books. The district has procured classroom sets of trade books that support certain themes, Santa says, and teachers are using the old textbooks only as a resource. "We haven't bought any new ones," she says.

Five elementary schools in the district are using literature as a "launching point" to integrate the curriculum, Santa says. For example, students in 5th

Many of the changes being considered for literature programs are designed to get students to "connect" with literature.

grade embarked on a unit on human rights. In so doing, they read the Bill of Rights, a biography of Sojourner Truth, and nonfiction pieces about the Black codes, women's rights, and so on. A 3rd grade class studied insects and spiders, and students read fiction and nonfiction stories on those topics. The teacher also wove in skill-building on such things as how to keep an observation journal and how to take effective notes, says Santa. "They're using the trade books to show children how to learn," she says.

The move to a literature-based, integrated approach was fueled by two desires: to have students read "real" books and "to simplify teachers' lives," says Santa. Integrating the curriculum, she explains, means teachers can focus on core concepts and themes and not have to jump from one subject to another so abruptly. On standard achievement test results, she adds, students continue "to perform very well."

What Are They Reading?

A continuing trend at all levels of education—elementary, middle, and secondary—is a move to broaden the scope of the literature curriculum, experts say. Teachers of literature from the earliest grades to the highest, for example, report trying to assign readings by more diverse authors; moreover, many language arts textbooks and libraries are becoming more multicultural. In addition, many teachers now encourage students to read broadly, sampling works from contemporary authors as well as reading the classics that make up the so-called "canon" of the great works of literature.

Of course, the effort to supplement (or supplant, as some fear) some of the works considered "classic" is hotly debated in the field. Some experts believe that truly worthy "classic" literature is still widely taught; others think that some notable authors and works are slipping out of the curriculum in favor of marginal works designed to appeal to student interests.

Although few national data exist, some experts feel that the literature read by students in elementary and middle schools these days is more likely to include selections that address children's "issues," as well as works by and about African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and so on.

At the secondary level, more national data show what literature students are reading; but experts continue to differ over the extent to which the literature curriculum is changing.

"Research indicates that the canon is alive and well" in schools, says Suhor of the National Council of Teachers of English. "Works for whole-class study have changed very little" over the past few decades (although Suhor adds that supplementary reading materials have changed).

A study of book-length works taught in grades 7–12, conducted by Arthur Applebee at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, suggests that the prominence of time-tested authors and classic works has changed little over the past 30 years. Several plays by Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*), Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Steinbeck's *The Pearl* and *Of Mice and Men*, and Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, continued to be taught in more than 50 percent of schools when the survey was conducted in 1988. (For more, see "Secondary Schools Slow to Change Approach to Literature," p. 5.)

So has the canon opened up to include more contemporary works and books by authors from diverse cultures? "In widespread practice, it clearly has not," says Applebee. Still, Applebee says that interest among teachers in diversifying their reading lists has grown since his study was published, and that this interest is beginning to push publishers to adjust selections in their literature anthologies.

Sandra Stotsky, research associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, believes that many teachers already have substituted more contemporary and diverse offerings for older selections. The "top 10" literary selections and authors may be time-tested classics and recognized literary titans, but that doesn't mean that all students read them, Stotsky says. Moreover, if one looks at entire reading lists for individual teachers, one would likely find a smattering of acknowledged classics mixed with more recent fare.

Diversity a Priority

Stephen Tchudi, professor of rhetoric and composition at the University of Nevada, Reno, says that teachers have good reasons for broadening the literature curriculum. One is that the traditional curriculum practically ignores literature written by non-whites. "It's no joke to say that the canon was determined by dead white guys," he says.

Making the literature curriculum more multicultural "is one of the big trends," says Bishop of Ohio State University. "There are more books [by diverse authors], and publishers are re-issuing books that had gone out of print" to meet demand. Diversity in the reading that students are asked to do for class assignments is essential, because "when kids don't see themselves reflected in the books that are sanctioned by the adults around them, they get messages that they don't really count," says Bishop. Further, a diverse reading list helps pupils empathize with characters in different circumstances from their own. Literature "gets inside the life of those characters and helps you see through different

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Secondary Schools Slow to Change Approach to Literature

The literature taught in American schools—and the methods used to teach it—remain quite traditional, according to a series of studies published last year by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

The studies, which were conducted by the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, were published last year by NCTE as *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*. Arthur Applebee, the center's director, wrote the report. The studies included visits to "exemplary" English programs, surveys of content and teaching methods, and analyses of popular literature anthologies. The portrait that emerges from the studies is a curriculum that has changed little over the years in terms of its organization and its materials. In addition, the studies found that the common teaching strategies for literature still rely heavily on the teacher as the authoritative source of uncovering meaning in literary works.

Among the findings from the studies:

• The books most often chosen for whole-class study are the "classics," largely written by white males and including relatively few contemporary authors. For example, of the works selected for whole-class study in public schools, 86 percent of the authors were male and 99 percent of them were white. Selections required in grades 7 and 8, and those required in noncollege-track classes, tended to be somewhat more contemporary and more likely to be written by women or minority authors. In addition, literature anthologies tended to include more minority and female authors than in the past, in part because they contain more short stories, poetry, and nonfiction, as opposed to long fiction and full-length plays.

• The organization of the curriculum was quite uniform from one school to another. The typical pattern was a study of genres in grades 7–10, American literature in grade 11, and British literature in grade 12. A few schools offered a course in world literature, usually in grade 10 or 12.

• Teachers rated highly a variety of goals for the teaching of literature. For example, the majority of public school teachers reported such goals as helping students experience pleasure in reading (85 percent), understand the relationships of literature to life (92 percent), to help students gain familiarity with literature (79 percent), and to gain cultural literacy (84 percent). The goals differed somewhat depending on what track students were enrolled in, however. Teachers of college-bound students were much more likely than teachers of nonacademic classes, for example, to have as a goal that students would learn to analyze individual texts, or that students would develop an informed taste in literature.

• Instructional strategies used to teach literature are still fairly traditional, although teachers use several strategies to elicit student response. "The typical lesson is a mixture of seatwork, in which students focus on 'what is happening' in the works they are asked to read, and teacher-led, whole-class discussion that tries to meld their individual understandings into an acceptable, commonly agreed-upon whole," the report states. Teachers tend to use techniques that reflect the influence of reader response theory *along with* more traditional text-centered techniques, borrowing "judiciously" from both.

• Perhaps most surprising, many educators appeared skeptical that much change would occur in the teaching of literature. Only about 40 percent of English department chairs in public schools expected any changes at all in content or approaches to teaching literature to occur in the next few years.

For more information about *Literature in the Secondary School*, contact the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801. ■

The Most Popular Works

The most popular book-length works assigned in public schools, by grade, and the percentage of schools requiring them, are:

Grade 7	*The Call of the Wild*	22%
	Tom Sawyer	15%
	The Red Pony	15%
	A Christmas Carol	15%
Grade 8	*Diary of a Young Girl*	34%
	The Call of the Wild	14%
	The Pigman	12%
Grade 9	*Romeo and Juliet*	76%
	Great Expectations	32%
	To Kill a Mockingbird	16%
	The Pearl	16%
Grade 10	*Julius Caesar*	64%
	The Pearl	31%
	To Kill a Mockingbird	29%
Grade 11	*The Scarlet Letter*	52%
	Huckleberry Finn	43%
	The Great Gatsby	39%
Grade 12	*Macbeth*	56%
	Hamlet	45%
	Lord of the Flies	19%
	1984	19%

Source: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning.

eyes," says Bishop. As a consequence of this reasoning, more teachers are trying to ensure that students sample broadly from works by and about different cultures.

The effort to make the literature curriculum more multicultural is not without its critics, however. Several commentators have remarked recently that books and stories that marginalize non-whites are being replaced by works in which most whites are villains. Stotsky cites such works as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* as stories in which no white characters are portrayed in a positive fashion. The purpose of including more diverse works no longer seems to be to help students respect and better understand one another, she says.

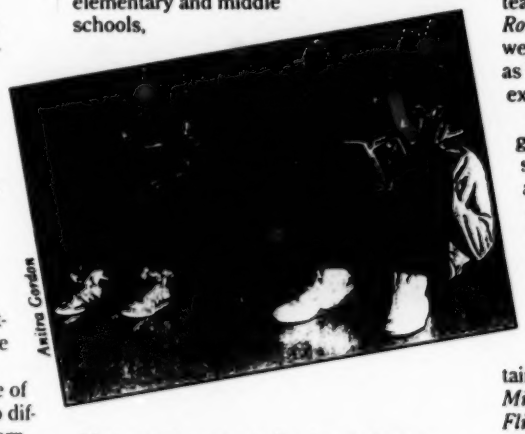
Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, took a similar position recently when he cautioned that some multiculturalists appear bent on getting "rid of one set of stereotypes only to replace them with another. . . . This is a change, but it is not an improvement, and there is a good chance that it will intensify the hostility that already exists among some groups."

Are the Classics Relevant?

Another reason for broadening the literature is to allow students to read more selections targeted for their age group, their interests, and their abilities. Some of the literature considered "classic" is too difficult for students to read, enjoy, and learn from, Tchudi says. "People have recognized that forcing students to read books beyond their level just kills their interest in literature," says Tchudi. Even Shakespeare, he points out, wrote for adult audiences—is it obligatory that *all* kids should read his works before graduating? Expanding reading lists to include more works written for young adults, moreover, will not result in a loss of academic rigor, he believes. "To me, relevance does not mean pandering to kids' tastes or abandoning standards." The role of the teacher in selecting literature, he says, is to find the "intersection" between students' needs and the demands of the discipline. "The canon has had a long time to prove itself in schools . . . and is anyone really satisfied with the results of that?" he asks.

Suhor also questions the idea that "classics" should fill the literature curriculum in secondary schools. "Who's to say that one must have had the classics by the time one has finished the 12th grade?" he says. Pupils could read some works in college or as adults. Moreover, "some classics are more readable than others." It's important to recognize that "you can study any good literature rigorously," says Suhor, whether it's Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*.

Other experts worry that the trend toward including more literature deemed relevant to students' tastes carries with it negative consequences, however. "It's certainly positive" to choose different kinds of works related to students' interests, says Stotsky. But it can be carried to extremes. She argues that the literature curriculum may have been diluted as it was broadened, partly because of the perception that the classics lack relevance to today's students. But often it's the language—not the themes of enduring human concerns—that causes students to feel that older literature isn't relevant. What's more, Stotsky says, when older works are supplanted in elementary and middle schools,



Akira Gordon

Most experts support allowing students to select some of the books they'll read in school, but say pupils should be "nudged" toward high-quality literature.

students are less likely to be able to handle the language in secondary school English classes.

"Teachers have to have some sense of balance," says Stotsky. "We've gone too far in catering to what we perceive as student interests. Relevance can be carried only so far." If teachers overemphasize motivational works, "we do have the danger of a dumbed-down curriculum for everybody."

Others say that though teachers should definitely put great literature on their reading lists, they shouldn't be troubled if students only gradually come to appreciate it. Many readers go through stages, avidly consuming "all the horse books, or all the Stephen King novels," says Alleen Pace Nilson, professor of English at Arizona State University. They "just need a little nudging" by the teacher to broaden their appetite. Good teachers "aren't just giving students what they already know and like," says Suhor. They're going to "take students to the next steps" by assigning increasingly challenging works.

Several teachers contacted for this issue of *Curriculum Update* confirmed that they teach a broad range of literature, and that students have some degree of choice in selecting at least part of the literature they read in school.

For example, Linda Rief, who teaches 7th and 8th grades at Oyster River Middle School in Durham, N.H., says that her main goal in teaching literature is to ensure that students "love reading and find authors whose books they will search out and read." About 80 percent of the reading students do is of their choice, Rief says, and *everyone* reads on Friday, herself included. Her classroom has bookshelves crammed with 500–700 selections. In class, she teaches widely recognized staples, such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Huckleberry Finn*, as well as time-tested student favorites, such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, hoping to expose students to all kinds of literature.

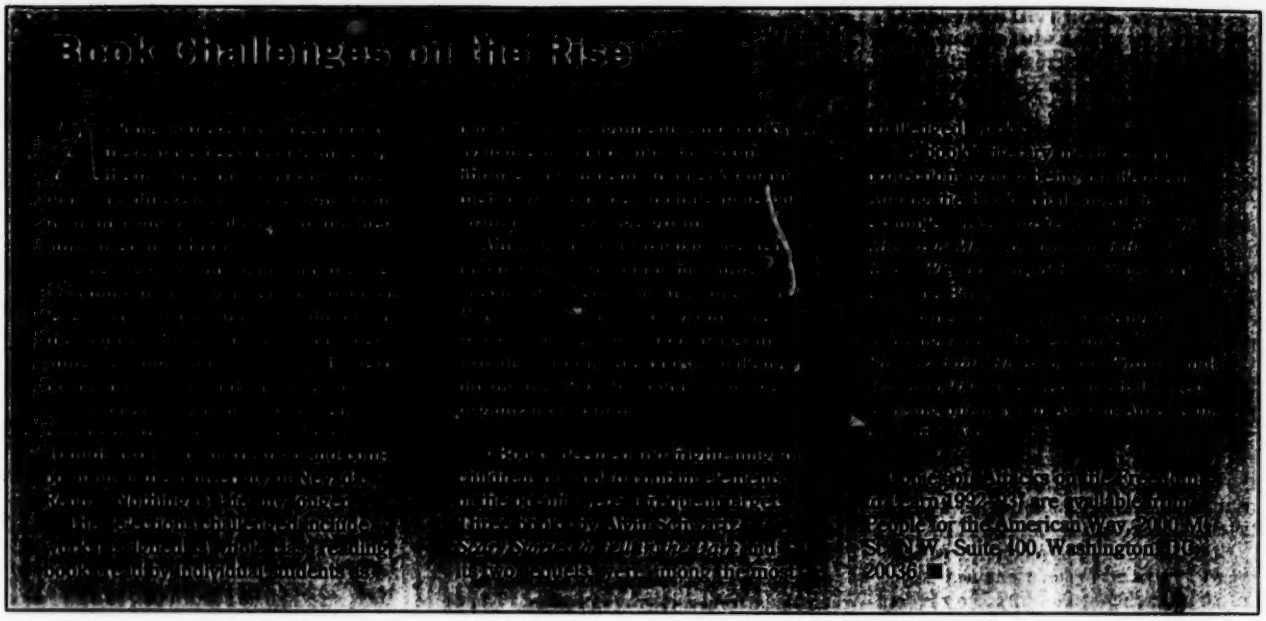
Gail Siegel, who teaches 7th and 8th grades at Ross School in Ross, Calif., says she hopes students "will leave here with an appreciation for a wide variety of literature." Siegel uses a bit of everything in her classroom—poetry, nonfiction, short stories, novels, even newspapers. And she admits that students often need some nudging to read widely from works considered "classics," as well as books that are just plain entertainment. Few students will read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Lord of the Flies* on their own, she notes. "Kids tend to want to read *The Pelican Brief*" or whatever is the hot book of the moment, she says. "We spend a lot of time arguing over what's literature and what's airplane reading."

Connecting with Text

One of the reasons for making a broader range of literature available to students, of course, is to increase the chance that they'll "engage" or "connect" with that literature. For the same reason, many educators are trying to change the way they *teach* literature—whether the work in question is Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* or Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*.

"Kids today insist on relevancy," says R. Stephen Green, assistant to the superintendent of the Lawrence Township, Ind., public schools and a former English teacher. "The instructor needs to create an environment where what's being taught connects to their world." But this doesn't mean dumping the classics: it means exploring the underlying themes of the human condition and using lots of different classroom approaches to get students involved. Further, Green says teachers have to use strategies that allow students to "engage" in the analysis of text from a variety of entry

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



points, by attending to students' different learning styles.

For example, Green observed a class in the midst of studying *King Lear*. As one of the activities, the teacher had students create reversible hats that exemplified two sides to a character, such as King Lear, Cordelia, or the Fool. The lesson helped students understand that duality of characters in the play and brought out that we all "change hats" throughout our lives. "Bringing the literature to life, making it relevant . . . is where the best teaching and learning is," says Green. "Students are searching for that kind of involvement."

The philosophy about teaching literature that has recently swept the field—in theory, if not yet in classroom practice—is known as "reader response" theory, experts report. At this stage, reader response theory has influenced higher education more than K–12, Applebee believes. "What's changing [in K–12 education] is that we're seeing a growing concern for literature as a source of independent student response."

Basically, reader response theory differs most radically from previous theories about teaching literature in the degree of emphasis placed on the reader's response to and interpretation of the text. "Teaching begins with the sense that students are making with the text," says Applebee. In reader response theory, the text's meaning is considered to reside in the "transaction" between the reader and the text, not from the text alone.

This is a departure from the old school of literary criticism, wherein all meaning was presumed to reside in the text, and the teacher's role was to lead students to predetermined conclusions. This often led to a "guessing game," with students trying to figure out what the teacher wanted them to discover in the work at hand.

When approaching a text, teachers under the traditional model usually "started with theme, plot, character, and symbols," downplaying what the reader felt about the selection, says Suhor. In practice, reader response theory considers very carefully how students respond intellectually and emotionally to the text.

In presenting a piece of literature, instead of telling students, "This is a wonderful work," a teacher should elicit students' own genuine responses, no matter how odd their perspectives on the work, says Joan Cutuly, a 20-year teaching veteran from Las Vegas, Nev. Let students attack the work if they choose, Cutuly says; the important thing is to let them know their feelings about it *count*. "Start with their outlandish criticisms," she advises, "then pick up the pieces and put them together." Students who like the work will typically speak up in its defense, she says.

By validating students' responses, teachers can spark a lively discussion from which a careful literary analysis will flow. "We've all got a group of experiences, and reactions to what we read," Cutuly says. If students' feelings about a work are made the first focus of discussion, then "everybody has somewhere to start," she says. Rather than beginning with a discussion of symbolism or metaphor, for example, teachers should allow an exploration of these aspects to develop from students' own observations about the work. "Allow kids to raise questions," Cutuly says—such as, Why did Eudora Welty give her character such an odd name as "Phoenix"? "You've got to create a ***need*** to understand metaphor," rather than just handing students an explanation of how an author uses metaphor, Cutuly emphasizes.

Class discussions play a key role in trying to elicit student response—and in trying to help them better understand the literature and their reaction to it. "The study of literature is about reading books and discussing them," says Carol Jago, who teaches 10th grade English and creative writing at Santa Monica High School in Santa Monica, Calif. In Jago's view, an effective literature teacher doesn't "lord over" students by emphasizing her knowledge of the text. Instead, she acts as a catalyst for the discussion, helping students brainstorm questions, participating in the discussion, but not "pontificating." The model she uses is more like an "adult book club," she says—a discussion among peers, not "the professor lecturing [the students] and asking tricky questions."

Is Every 'Response' Valid?

Although practices informed by reader response theory have captured the professional journals and conferences, some experts are concerned that *too* much emphasis on student response can backfire. Some advocates of reader response appear to posit that "everything is relative—that your idea and my idea are equally good," says Smith. In such a scenario, even what

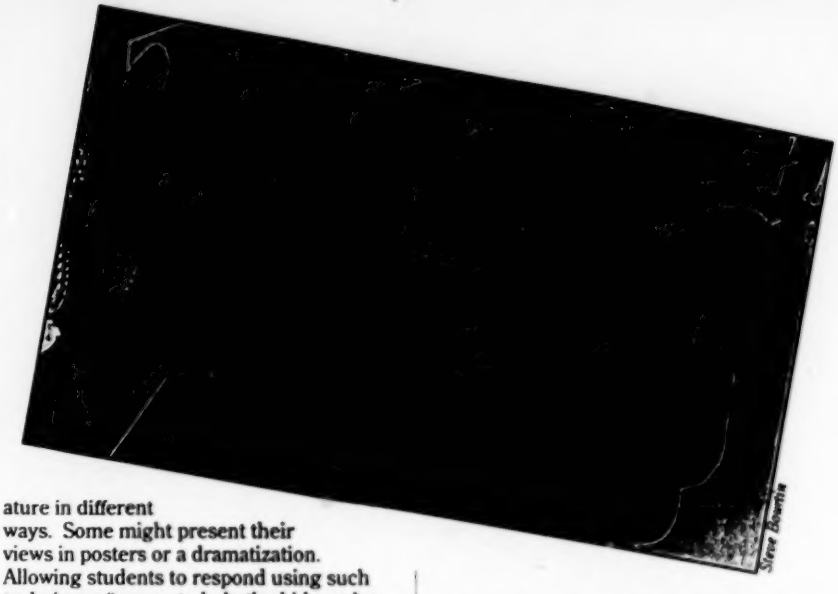
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the author said about a text is considered of no more merit than what any one reader might suppose. "That really worries me," Smith adds. Others are concerned that a spirit of "anything goes" would reign if teachers attended to reader response theory, and that students wouldn't learn mature, formal responses to literature.

"That's a common misconception about reader response [theory] in general," says Applebee. "Student-centered approaches don't mean that anything goes." Neither should the notion of getting students to discuss how they *feel* about a text mean that the analysis should stop there. The "How do you feel?" question is "an opening gambit," says John Clifford, professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. "It's valid as step one in a process of trying to get the students to connect the reality of *Hamlet* with the reality of their own lives." But any good teacher would take the discussion far beyond that.

"It sounds like a Pollyanna theory, but it isn't," Patricia Phelan, a language arts resource teacher at Crawford High School in San Diego, says about reader response theory. Students simply will not understand or care about the literary work "until they make *some* connection" with it, she says. So teachers *must* use various hooks to get students connecting and responding to the text. But the emphasis on getting students to respond to the literature doesn't mean that any response is as good as another. Students are "continuously urged to return to the text to find validation" for their views. It takes a skillful teacher to mediate the dialogue, she adds. "When teachers let kids just talk, without direction to the talk, there isn't much learning."

What does a class on a piece of literature look like, when the teacher takes reader response theory seriously? There are lots of possible approaches, but Phelan suggests one example. She'd probably start by using cooperative learning, because that would probably "get a wider response . . . and allow everybody to be heard." Students would then be asked to respond to the literature in different ways. Some might present their views in posters or a dramatization. Allowing students to respond using such techniques "seems to help the kids understand," Phelan says. The students would also do plenty of writing, but the writing would be for a variety of purposes. "There would be a great deal more writing of different types." This might include writing short responses to prompts, creating "dialog journals," and writing more formal pieces.



Students should "love reading and find authors whose books they will search out and read," says one teacher describing her goals for teaching literature.

Change in Discussion

As with many proposed reform initiatives, the wholesale changes being advocated for the teaching of literature must now make the tough transition from theory to practice. Currently, the kinds of practices advocated as the leading edge—reader response theory, literature-based programs, and so on—are not widely practiced. Applebee says the past few years have been marked by a "change in the discussion that's just making its way into the classroom."

A series of studies completed at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning suggests that, in many ways, the teaching of literature has changed little through the years (see p. 5). Part of the reason, Applebee writes in a recent book published by the NCTE, is that new theories about literature have largely ignored pedagogical issues. So teachers have taken an eclectic path: organizing the curriculum around traditional genres, chronologies, or themes; using reader response techniques to foster student involvement; and relying on traditional techniques for studying individual texts.

"What is lacking is a well-articulated overall theory of the teaching and learning of literature, one that will give a degree of order and coherence to the daily decisions that teachers make about what and how to teach," Applebee writes. The extent to which the field generates such a framework is likely to play a significant role in whether changes in the teaching of literature will continue to be episodic, or whether they become widely practiced. ■

John O'Neil, Editor
Scott Willis, Staff Writer

Forging Covenants in Teaching and Learning for the Success of All Learners

ASCD Curriculum Update

Gene Carter, *Executive Director*
Ron Brandt, *Executive Editor*
Nancy Modrak, *Manager, Editorial Services*
Carolyn Pool, *Associate Editor*
Stephanie Justen, *Asst. Manager, Production Services*
Gary Bloom, *Manager, Design and Production Services*
Karen Monaco, *Senior Graphic Designer*

ASCD Curriculum Update is published four times per year as a supplement to *ASCD Update*, the official newsletter of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1453. Telephone: 703/549-9110 (switchboard hours are 8 to 5, Monday through Friday, Eastern Time). Copyright 1994.

ASCD Curriculum Update reports trends, research findings, exemplary programs, and available resources in a specific curriculum area.

Reprint Policy: Educators are permitted to reproduce a single article from *ASCD Update* without requesting permission from ASCD, provided that the duplication is for an educational purpose by a nonprofit institution, that copies are made available without charge beyond the cost of reproduction, and that each copy includes a full citation of the source. Other requests will be handled on a case-by-case basis by writing to the above address. Those requesting permission to reprint entire issues of *ASCD Update* or *ASCD Curriculum Update* are ordinarily requested to purchase bulk quantities according to the price rate provided in each publication.

Subscriptions to this publication are included in ASCD membership, but additional copies may be ordered (prepaid only) at the following rates:

1 copy	$1.00 and SASE
10 copies	$12.50
25 copies	$20.00
50 copies	$30.00
100 copies	$50.00

When ordering, please cite stock no. 1-94054

BEST COPY AVAILABLE